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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/PD (ANYASO, TITUS, LISENBY), AF/W (ACOOK)
DEPARTMENT FOR USAID (ALETA WILLIAMS)

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: BENIN: GPRA REPORT : ALETA WILLIAMS

REF: SECSTATE 117838

SUMMARY: To highlight post's Black History Month focus on education, Mission Benin hosted a speaker program with Aleta Williams, Senior Education Advisor, USAID/AFR. Williams was the featured speaker at a February 25 public conference on the topic "Education and Employment: Making the Connections," which was held at the American Cultural Center. During her visit to Benin, Williams also went on education site visits and held interviews with media outlets in Benin. END SUMMARY.

12. DATE OF ACTIVITY: February 25; Second quarter, FY 09.

13. PROGRAM JUSTIFICATION/OBJECTIVES: This public lecture by USAID Senior Education Advisor, Aleta Williams, was one of the PAS Cotonou initiatives to celebrate Black History Month (BHM). This seminar highlighted the role and importance of education as a social force that could change individuals and communities and foster economic empowerment.

14. MPP UMBRELLA THEMES AND AUDIENCE REACHED: Promoting Education, Basic Health and Human Rights; Mutual Understanding. Around 100 participants, including students from the University of Abomey-Calavi and other private colleges in Cotonou, lecturers, journalists, and other interested guests attended the conference that was covered by all major media outlets including TV, radio and print media. Estimated audience reached: 3.5 million.

15. ACTIVITIES/IMPACT/RESULT: In her opening remarks, the Deputy Chief of Mission introduced the speaker and explained USAID's role in the field of education and cited data to show the investment of the American people in the field of education in Benin. She stressed the role of education as a key element in the economic growth of all nations.

Williams' remarks focused on five key elements regarding Education and Employment: the transformative power of education for personal development; the role of family and community support; the necessity of tapping into the country's full potential for economic growth; the links between education and employment; and the critical need to focus on skills development and the pursuit of excellence. Given the impending explosion of the youth population in Sub-Saharan Africa in the next decade, Williams noted that something needs to be done to develop skills to address job market needs. Williams recommended that the private sector, industry and government should work together to ensure that skills are being developed to satisfy market needs and that the private sector offer the opportunity of internships and other hands-on training programs to enhance skills development.

After Williams' speech, two local speakers gave an overview of the higher technical education system and the secondary technical education and employment options in Benin. Both of these speakers noted that resources and skills are available, but opined that the poor allocation of resources and funds prevented the country from achieving its development goals.

A rich question and answer session followed that allowed participants to contribute to the discussion. One University faculty member said that success is a result of preparation and opportunities and expressed appreciation for the opportunity to participate in this conference. Another lecturer was interested in how universities in the United States bridge the gap between theory and practice so that graduate students leave university with some practical experience. Students from the audience expressed their interest in this aspect of the discussion and their concern that neither secondary nor higher education in Benin afforded enough of the practical skills needed for employment, nor sufficient linkages and opportunities for internships within the public and private sectors.

¶6. NON-USG SOURCES OF IN-COUNTRY FUNDING/IN KIND SUPPORT:

The participation of local speakers like Marcellin Hyle, Director of the Agricultural Technical Secondary School of Adja-Ouere and Virgile Ahi, President of the Regional Institute of Industrial Engineering and Biotechnology (IRGIB-Africa) and other guests like faculty members of the University of Abomey-Calavi brought vivid experience to the conference.

¶7. QUALITY OF USG SUPPORT: Excellent. Kudos to Aleta Williams, Senior Education Adviser, USAID/AFR, for accepting the invitation to come to Benin for this program. Her experience and knowledge of Africa and education programs were highly appreciated.

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